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## Navy Medicine Plays Ball on the Field of Dreams

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Navy Officers baseball team 1895-96. (Photo courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command)

In the photographic archives of the [Naval Historical Center](#) there is an image of a Navy officer baseball team dated 1895. Although the location the photograph is up for conjecture, the seated man holding a baseball bat is not. The man is none other than future Navy surgeon general and inventor of the wire-basket stretcher, Dr. Charles F. Stokes. Efforts to determine the doctor's slugging percentage that year have been unsuccessful, but we like to think the idea for the "Stokes Stretcher" was born mid-way through the seventh inning in one of his baseball games (seventh inning stretch).

At Washington Senators games in the beginning of the twentieth century it was not uncommon to see Navy medical officers and White House physicians like [Cary Grayson](#), [Joel Boone](#) and [Ross McIntire](#) sitting in the stands next to the president and first lady. During the

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1917 season, there is a good chance Admiral Grayson (President Woodrow Wilson's personal physician and confidant) witnessed the play of Senators shortstop "[Doc" Lavan](#), an actual physician and Major League Baseball's only commissioned Navy doctor (1) (2).

Born in Grand Rapids, Mich. on March 28, 1890, [John Leonard Lavan](#) went to Hope College, Holland, Mich. and later medical school at the University of Michigan where he played baseball for the legendary Branch Rickey.



"Doc" Lavan fielding for the St. Louis Browns 1915. (Photo courtesy of Baseball Hall of Fame)

"While I like the game, I felt it was my duty to enlist with the country at war. If I survive, surgery and medicine will be my profession and not baseball."

On active duty, Lavan would serve as a physician at the Naval Training Station, Great Lakes where he conducted exams on new recruits. He would also act as a manager for the Navy's baseball club in 1918 before returning back to the major leagues for the 1919 season. After 11 years playing ball, Lavan would go on to manage in the minor league for the Kansas City Blues and then, fittingly, the Lincoln SaltDogs until 1927.

Throughout his time in baseball he practiced his medical craft during the offseason at dispensaries in Lincoln, Neb., Kansas City, and St. Louis, Missouri. He would later work in public health departments in Toledo, Ohio and Grand Rapids, Mich. In the 1940s, Lavan would serve as the Director of Research for the National Foundation for Infant Paralysis (later known as the "March of Dimes.") He would remain in the Naval Reserves throughout this time and was recalled to active service in 1942 where he served at Naval Hospital Brooklyn, N.Y. Lavan died in Detroit, Mich. on May 29, 1952 and would later be one of the few baseball players interred at Arlington National Cemetery.



Pee Wee Reese (third from left) playing for Naval Hospital Aiea Heights, HI. (Photo courtesy of Baseball Hall of Fame)

As a veteran of two wars, Lavan was not the exception among baseball players. In the "Great War" and World War II baseball players entered the military services in droves. It is interesting to note that in the First World War 11 Major and Negro League players would be

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killed in action or die of disease while in service. During the Second World War, over 500 major league baseball players served and hundreds of semi-pro and amateur ball players were killed or died of their wounds (3).

In his book *Playing for Their Nation: Baseball and the American Military during World War II*, Steven Bullock reminds us that baseball did not die in World War II. In many respects it flourished, and like everything else in America it was molded by the irrepressible wartime culture. As the pool of younger major league talent was gradually siphoned into wartime service the quality of many military baseball teams and leagues vastly improved.



Ted Williams aboard USS Haven, 1953. (Photo courtesy of the Nancy Crosby Collection, BUMED archives)

For a time the baseball team at Naval Training Station Great Lakes included Johnny Mize, Bob Feller, and was managed by hall of fame catcher [Mickey Cochrane](#). Navy Mobile Hospital 8 (Fleet Hospital 108) in Brisbane, Australia, included Phil Rizzuto on its team, and at Naval Hospital Aiea Heights, T.H., future hall of famer [Pee Wee Reese](#) played second base for its "Hilltoppers" baseball club. Reese would go on to represent the naval hospital in the "Serviceman's All Star Game" in 1943 and the Central Pacific Area Service Championship playing against [Joe DiMaggio](#) of the Army Air Forces.

Undoubtedly, DiMaggio's greatest rival in baseball was the "Splendid Splinter," [Ted Williams](#). Williams would have the unique distinction of serving five years in uniform (1942-46; 1952-53) with the Navy and Marine Corps. During the Korean War, Williams flew 39 combat missions many alongside future astronaut John Glenn. In March 1953, Williams was treated for pneumonia 22 days aboard USS Haven (AH-12). Navy

nurse Lt. Nancy Crosby would later remember him as a patient on her ward. "When he was getting better I asked him if he would mind if I took a couple of pictures." recalled Crosby. "He was the most gracious fellow."

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### **Footnotes.**

(1) The real Baseball's "Doc." The website "Baseball Reference" lists over 100 Major League and Negro League baseball players nicknamed "doc." A majority of them were pitchers known for their mastery of throwing the baseball or as it has been termed, "holding a clinic." Of baseball's "docs" several were actual physicians. In the 1906 World Series—the only time two Chicago teams battled each other in the Fall Classic—the Cubs and White Sox boasted three degreed physicians on their active rosters. Some ball players pursued medicine following their athletic careers. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham (1879-1965) played one game for the New York Giants in 1905 (without an actual at bat). "Doc" Graham would spend the next fifty years practicing medicine in Chisholm, Minn. His plight would be made famous by the W.P. Kinsella book, *Shoeless Joe* later adapted to the big screen in 1989. On baseball's "field of dreams," only John Leonard Lavan to have been both a professional baseball player and a commissioned as a Navy physician.

(2) During the 1916 season, Lavan also played alongside of one James "Doc" Crandall. Although not an actual physician, Crandall was notable as an early relief pitcher and was given the nickname "Doc" by writer Damon Runyan who said that he was the "physician of the pitching emergency."

(3) In 1918, the United States was in its second year fighting in the Great War. Like their counterparts in World War II, Major Leaguers joined the war effort in 1917 and 1918 in droves. Hall of Famers Grover Cleveland Alexander, Christy Mathewson, Tris Speaker and Lavan's teammate George Sisler were among the first to enlist their services; Rube Marquand and Red Faber among those to enlist in Navy.

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